

Rabid fox in Baldwin County prompts reminders to immunize pets
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The diagnosis of a rabid fox in the Clear Springs area in Baldwin County has prompted public officials to encourage pet owners to be sure their dogs and cats are vaccinated against the fatal disease. Charlotte Plumb, environmental supervisor with the Baldwin County Health Department, said, "We strongly caution people not to approach stray animals, wildlife and bats."

Rabies is a disease of all warm-blooded mammals, including man. The disease is almost always fatal in humans if preventative treatment is not obtained. Prevention of human rabies by a series of vaccinations must be started in a timely manner.

According to Alabama public health laws, all animal bites are reportable to the Alabama Department of Public Health. The primary means of exposure is through a bite or scratch with contaminated saliva contacting the wound. Transmission of the deadly virus can also occur if saliva contacts a mucous membrane such as the eye or mouth.

The most consistent clinical sign of rabies in animals is an observable change from normal behavior. Any wild animals that suddenly appear friendly, docile or approach humans should be considered suspect of being infected, and therefore avoided. Nocturnal animals such as raccoons and foxes that become active in the daytime are also dangerous visitors, and several exposures occur each year in Alabama when children or pets approach these wild animals which have wandered into their yard.

Dr. Dee W. Jones, Associate State Public Health Veterinarian, said, "Generally, it is best to contact animal control professionals before attempting to help or handle strangely behaving or injured wildlife, bats or stray animals."

Vaccination of domestic dogs and cats not only protects the animals against rabies, but also provides the best method of protecting a buffer between wildlife rabies and humans. State law requires that dogs and cats three months of age and older be vaccinated for rabies annually.